

Beauty and Nick & by Sir Philip Gibbs

(Continued from Last Week.)

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(CHAPTER XIV. Continued.)

"If you don't apologize now, I will thrash you."

Nick raised his fist for a smashing blow.

"I am sorry," said Rosenbaum very quickly. He retreated a little to the mantelpiece, and said:

"I did not mean to be so brutal. Your mother knows that my tongue sometimes gets between my teeth."

He laughed nervously, and then took out a cigarette and tapped it on the mantelpiece.

Kitty's voice came across the piano.

"In another moment there would have been a lifeless corpse. Oh, Nick, you looked splendid in your wrath. Like a young god. What a pity Rosenbaum is a coward and ate his words! What a drama spoiled!"

Rosenbaum turned round savagely at her.

"Shut up!" he said.

"Oh, dear! I wish everybody wouldn't be so violent!" said Beauty.

"Nick, darling, you have given me quite a turn."

Kitty Burpham laughed quite gaily.

"Wonderful world! Wonderful people!"

Then her husband entered, with his monocle screwed in his eye and his fat smile on his face. He ignored his wife, and went straight over to Beauty and raised her hand to his lips.

"How goes it, fair lady?"

"I'm going anyhow," said Rosenbaum, in his most sullen way. He strode out of the room, without saying good-by.

Baby Burpham raised his blonde eyebrows so that his monocle fell.

"Has Rosy got the hump or something? Thank Heaven for that, if it relieves us of his most objectionable presence."

"He means well," said Beauty.

"He's been very good to me."

Burpham gave a queer laugh, and stared at Beauty so that a wave of color swept into her face.

"In expectation of favors to come," he said.

Beauty flung a cushion at him, which he caught with his left hand in time to save his head.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Kitty. "Now we are going to have Baby's flow of original wit, his brilliant gifts of repartee, his subtle innuendoes. Nick, save me, lest I die. Take me to the theatre, or something."

"Yes," said Beauty. "Take the child to the theatre, Nick. It will do you both good."

"I'll pay," said Baby Burpham, taking out two sovereigns from the silver purse on his watch chain, and flinging them across the piano to Kitty.

Lady Burpham grabbed them, and made a face.

"They seem precious glad to get rid of us," said Kitty. "Don't they, Nick?"

Burpham grinned.

"We see too much of each other, even for such a loving couple as ourselves. Take a rest from me, Kit."

"Thanks," said Kitty. "I will. Come on, Nick."

Nick went unwillingly, cursing himself for a weak fool. Yet he was glad to get out into the fresh air, and glad to escape from Baby Burpham, whom he hated worse than Rosenbaum.

Outside of the hotel Kitty stuck up her umbrella and hailed a handsome cab.

"Drive round," she said, "anywhere, Clapham Common, or Wild West Kensington. Keep going; that's all. See."

The cabman touched his hat. He had heard of such things before.

"I thought we were going to the theatre," said Nick.

"It's too deadly," said Kitty. "Same old plays, same old women, same old jokes. God! I couldn't stand it to-night. . . . Settle yourself down. Nick. . . . How cool and sweet the air is! . . . Look at the stars twinkling above the rooftops. Let's go beyond the lights of the streets, into some place of darkness where there are only stars. The commons are not far away. . . . I feel pagan to-night. I want fresh air, solitude, space, the smell of the earth, the song of the stars. . . . Ever feel like that, Nick?"

"Often."

They were silent for a time. Nick listened to the kipl-klop of the horse's feet, the jingle-jangle of its bells. He stared at the lights as they flashed by, at the vague, white faces of hurrying people. But all the time his thoughts were with Beauty. He wished to heaven he could persuade her to get rid of Rosenbaum and Baby Burpham. He would ask her to come away into the country with him. After the run of her place she might like the idea, and it was coming off quite soon—to-morrow, now he came to think of it. She would be free then for a little while, and they could have a holiday alone in some old country inn among the fields and the flowers. It would be cleansing to both of them. It would cleanse them of this London malady, this fever-stricken life.

"Nick," said Kitty, "you and I are twin souls, strange as it may appear."

"Think so?"

"I know it. I am like you, Nick—good at the heart. All my swear-

words don't mean anything. If I could get away from Baby I should get clean again. It is he who smirches me, who puts the devil into me. He is a beast of beasts. Away from him I should be a decent thing. I have good instincts. I love the beauty of things. I love the souls of things. Understand, Nick?"

"Perfectly."

She was silent again for a long time, until the cab took them out of the crowded London streets into the quieter suburbs, and presently into a road alongside a great open space where there was quietude and darkness. It was Clapham Common.

Kitty put her hand through the trap and said "Stop!"

"What are you going to do now?" asked Nick.

"Let's walk about a bit."

She jumped out of the cab, and after some words to the driver, who seemed anxious about the fare, took Nick's hand and walked on to the Common, until they were beyond the light of the gas lamps and in the shadow world of trees which loomed out of the darkness.

It was a warm night and the air was very still. The sky was strewn with stars. They were reflected in the mirror of a pond as though they were floating there.

"It is good to be here," said Kitty. "This is better than the theatre with its glare of lights, and stench of women's perfumes and scented hair. Pah! The beastliness of civilized life! The rottenness of it all!"

Suddenly she began to cry a little.

"What's the matter?" asked Nick.

He felt horribly ill at ease. He had a sense of danger. Kitty's tears made her more dangerous to him than her swear words.

"I'm so beastly lonely!" she whimpered. "I feel always alone in the great desert of life."

Then suddenly she came close to him, and put her arms about his neck, and her face so close to his face that her breath was warm upon his lips.

"Nick, you've been a pal to me since I knew you. I love you, Nick. Can't we cut and run together? We could be as happy as kids, you and I. I would teach you how to love. I would put my arms round you like this, and kiss you—like this!"

She kissed him a dozen times, clasping him so tight that he could not struggle from her. She clung to him, with a kind of desperate strength.

He jerked his head back, and cried out:

"Don't! For Heaven's sake, don't! Are you mad, Kitty?"

"Yes, as mad as a hatter. I am mad for your love, Nick, because you are such a boy and so good in your heart. You would make me less sick with the world. We could make a great game of life. Oh, my dear boy! My pretty boy! I want you so badly. Kiss me, Nick. Kiss me!"

He managed to get his arms free from her clasp, roughly. He held her by the wrists, so that she could not cling to him.

"This is horrible!" he said. "Behave yourself, can't you?"

He spoke brutally, savage with her for this abandonment of self-respect. In the darkness she seemed to him witch-like. He could see the whiteness of her face, and her burning eyes.

She was panting like a wild creature.

"Don't be a prig, Nick. Be kind and human. Don't you understand? You and I want each other. We are made for each other. I am your mate woman. God made me your mate, Nick."

She thrust her face forward again, and tried to cling to him again. Her lips were kissing the air. Her eyes had a greenish light, like cat's eyes. But he still held her wrists quite tightly, and kept her away.

"Be quiet!" he said sharply. "You are a married woman. I . . ."

"A married woman?"

That's a lie. Burpham's beastliness made me free of him. But I would be loyal to you, Nick: loyal to the death, in big things and little things. Surely you won't be angry with me because I am ready to give you all the best in me. All that is good in me would be yours. And if you like you can throw me away when you are tired of me. Chuck me away like an old boot. Won't you make me pledge yourself. When you are sick of me, I'll take the hint. You can send me off with a nod and a 'That's enough!' But for a little while, Nick, for a few months, a few weeks, we could be as happy as kittens. We would play at love together, and make believe, and I would be as good as gold."

"Good!" said Nick. "Oh, Lord! You don't understand the word. You speak like a vile creature. You . . . you make me shiver."

"Do it!" she said. "Do it!"

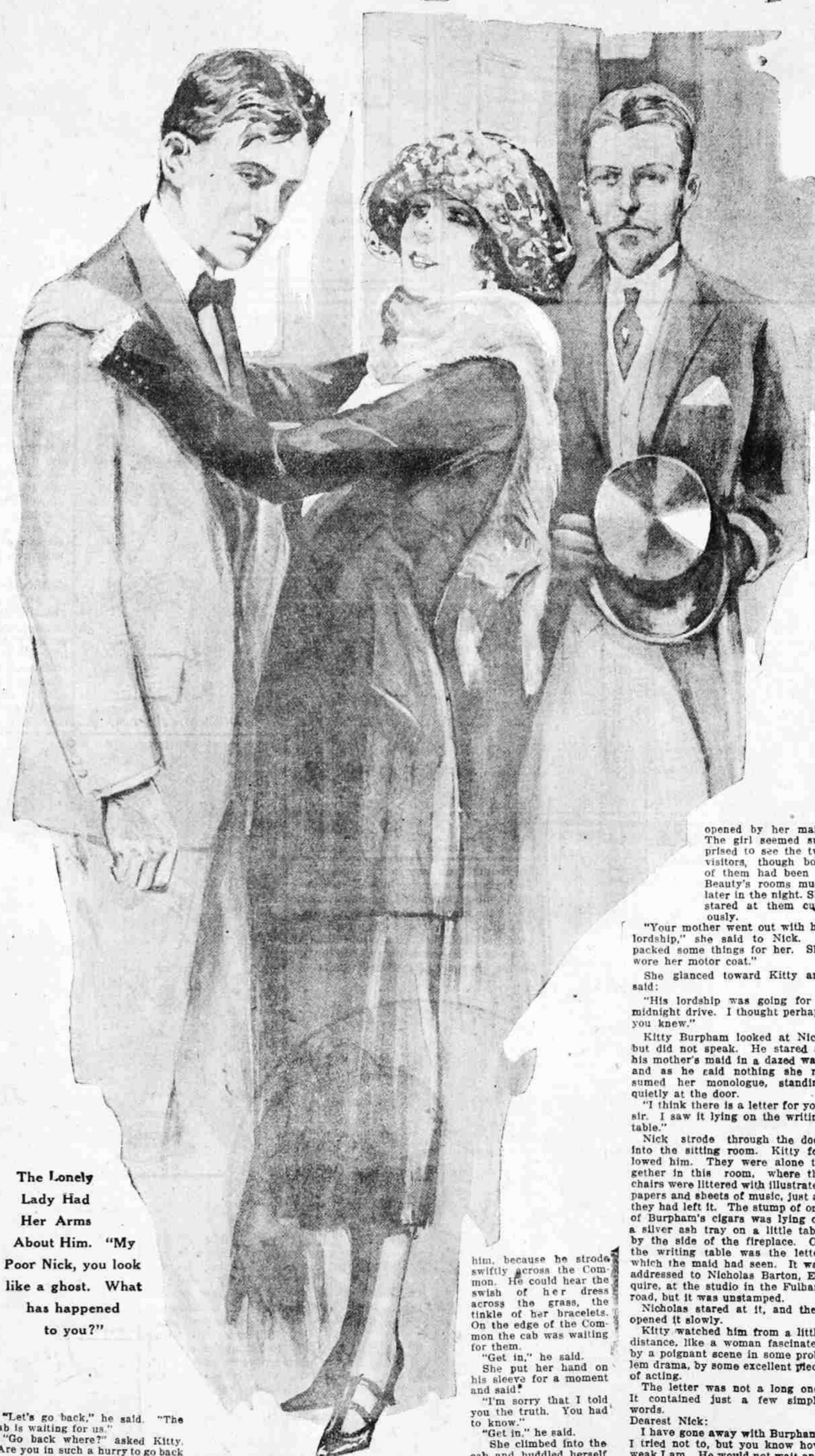
All the pleading in her voice changed to a sudden shrill rage, and she jerked her hands free from his grasp.

"Why, you are like the rest of the men, as cruel as devils. I thought you were kind."

She laughed with hysteria in her voice.

"Lord God! I thought he was kind!"

Nick was scared now. This scene in the darkness of the lonely common was fantastic and horrible.



The Lonely
Lady Had
Her Arms
About Him. "My
Poor Nick, you look
like a ghost. What
has happened
to you?"

"Let's go back," he said. "The cab is waiting for us."

"Go back where?" asked Kitty. "Are you in such a hurry to go back to a mother who is playing the wanton with my man?"

Nick cried out in a voice of horror, "Kitty!"

"Oh, I won't spare you now," said Kitty. "I will tell you what I wanted to hide from you, because I thought it would hurt you. Hurt you? I want to hurt you. I shall laugh to hear you moan like a wounded thing when you know the truth. Haven't you guessed the truth about Beauty and Baby Burpham, about Beauty and Rosenbaum? You shut your eyes to the truth. That precious mother of yours! Beauty! The mother you worship with your eyes. Why, she is rotten to the heart. Baby Burpham is her lover, with Rosenbaum, the Jew. Don't you know that, poor innocent? Don't you know that she and Burpham, my baby-faced husband, are as guilty as two devils? Oh, you groan. Because you know I tell the truth,

and the truth hurts. But it is fit for tat. You hurt me, didn't you? Called me a vile creature? Yes, but not so vile as that lady mother of yours, who sends us out together so that she may be alone with the man she belongs to. Go back to her now, and ask her whether I lie. She will swear I lie, but you will see the guilt in her eyes. Why, I knew it months ago. I can give you dates and times. But I said nothing. I laughed. I taunted Baby with it, and laughed again. I laugh now. It is a rare joke, and I have a pretty sense of humor."

She laughed in the darkness, and Nick shuddered at the sound of her witch-like laughter, so shrill and horrible.

"You had better go back," he said, quietly. "I will take you to your cab."

She walked a little way behind

him, because he strode swiftly across the Common. He could hear the swish of her dress across the grass, the tinkle of her bracelets. On the edge of the Common the cab was waiting for them.

"Get in," he said. She put her hand on his sleeve for a moment and said:

"I'm sorry that I told you the truth. You had to know."

She climbed into the cab and huddled herself into the corner.

"We will go back," said Nick, "and I will ask you to say before my mother what you have said to me. If what you said was false, perhaps God, or something, will teach me how to punish you."

He gave the address to the man, and took his seat in the cab.

They drove back in silence. Kitty Burpham cried part of the way, and then was very still. Toward the end of the journey she spoke his name very softly in a pleading way, but he did not answer her. His face was as hard as though carved out of granite. As the cab rattled into the hotel courtyard Kitty spoke again.

"It is the truth, Nick. I swear to God it is the truth. But I'm sorry."

Big Ben struck twelve strokes as Nick fumbled in his pocket and paid the cabman.

The door of Beauty's flat was

opened by her maid. The girl seemed surprised to see the two visitors, though both of them had been to Beauty's rooms much later in the night. She stared at them curiously.

"Your mother went out with his lordship," she said to Nick. "I packed some things for her. She wore her motor coat."

She glanced toward Kitty and said:

"His lordship was going for a midnight drive. I thought perhaps you knew."

Kitty Burpham looked at Nick, but did not speak. He stared at his mother's maid in a dazed way, and as he said nothing she resumed her monologue, standing quietly at the door.

"I think there is a letter for you, sir. I saw it lying on the writing table."

Nick strode through the door into the sitting room. Kitty followed him. They were alone together in this room, where the chairs were littered with illustrated papers and sheets of music, just as they had left it. The stump of one of Burpham's cigars was lying on a silver ash tray on a little table by the side of the fireplace. On the writing table was the letter which the maid had seen. It was addressed to Nicholas Barton, Esquire, at the studio in the Fulham road, but it was unstamped.

Nicholas stared at it, and then opened it slowly.

Kitty watched him from a little distance, like a woman fascinated by a poignant scene in some problem drama, by some excellent piece of acting.

The letter was not a long one. It contained just a few simple words.

Dearest Nick:

I have gone away with Burpham. I tried not to, but you know how weak I am. He would not wait any longer for me. I suppose the devil has something to do with it. Of course, I hate myself, and I know you will think the worst of me. I was born bad. If only I had been born good! You see, I blot this paper with my tears. Your father will say they are sham tears. But there is salt in them.

Good-by, dearest Nick. Your loving P. S.—Tell Kitty I'm sorry.

Beauty.

Nicholas read the letter very slowly and then crumpled it in his hand. His face was deadly white, and a mist came before his eyes. Kitty, who was watching him, saw that he swayed a little, as though overcome with faintness. But he turned round to her and held out the letter.

"You told the truth," he said. "And you were right. It hurts. . . . It hurts."

The girl went down on her knees

before him as he sat down heavily on the sofa, with his head drooping forward.

"Nick, dear Nick . . . You and I are together in this. . . . We have both chucked us. . . . Oh, sweetheart, let us comfort each other. Let me stay with you and love you. We both want love badly."

She poured out a flood of words, fondling his hands, clinging to him.

For a little while he seemed unconscious of her. Indeed, he was utterly unconscious of her, thinking only of Beauty, who had loved him again, who had twice abandoned him.

Then he stood up very straight and spoke in a quiet, hollow voice.

"You are as vile as Beauty. You have the same kind of heart and brain. You and my mother . . . pretty pair! I don't know what such women as you are allowed to live."

She still clung to his arm, but he thrust her off violently and strode out of the room and out the passage. On his way to the door he had knocked over a little table, but what he did not see or hear it fall. In the streets of London, and in the suburbs beyond, he walked for hours, until the dawn came and then the day, and he staggered home to his studio half-way through the morning. The man who had traveled a long way with despair.

Yet he was quite calm when he spoke to Comyns, who had finished breakfast and was lying back in the cane arm chair, reading the literary column of the Morning Post.

Comyns was less calm. He seemed to shrink Nick's eyes, and to be restless and ill at ease. He flung the paper down and went up and down the room lighting cigarettes, smoking them for a whiff or two, then flinging them into the fire grate.

"Any breakfast going?" asked Nick. He busied himself with the gas stove and boiled up the kettle and made himself some tea. He was famished, and hunger and fatigue dulled the sharp edge of the pain which had throbbled his brain through the night. Now he felt strangely calm and self-composed, like a drugged man, and about the head, with all his emotions blunted.

Comyns stared at him once or twice when he was not looking, and made some random remarks which Nick answered shortly.

Then he whistled a musical melody over and over again, as he stood with his hands in his pockets staring out of the window. Finally he swung round on his heel abruptly and said:

"Nick, old man, I think we shall have to dissolve partnership. I have been thinking things over, and I have decided not to go on with this art game. I shan't waste this studio any more."

Nick sliced off the top of his egg. "I thought you wouldn't stick to it. Going back to Grosvenor Square?"

Comyns laughed rather nervously.

"Eh, passant, perhaps. But I shall set up elsewhere, after I have squared the governor."

"A new hobby?" asked Nick.

He was only wondering where he could find a cheap studio for himself. He would have to get the cheapest place he could. Perhaps, after all, it would be good to live alone a time waster. He would waste no more time. He would work early and late, to make up for lost time. During the night he had turned over a new leaf. After the grief and agony of the night, when his mother's betrayal had shattered the world beneath his feet, he had become sane with the daylight. He had seen things then with a cold, white vision. He praised God that after his accusations of all women's hood, after his condemnation of the mother, arranged before the judge, the sickness and loathing with which the thought of Kitty Burpham had made him spiritually ill, his faith in virtue, which had been shipwrecked, was saved by the memory of Joan. He clung to the ideal of Joan like a drowning man. He clung to his love for her as a saving grace in this wild storm of his soul. And then he groped his way back to old ambitions, which lighted again the old fires, which had burnt out in his heart. He would work to win her. He would work as a man inspired by the hope of a great prize. He had failed to gain the gold medal, but with the help of God, he would fail to gain the heart of Joan, which was of purer gold. . . . Work, that would heal his wounds. Work, the great spiritual tonic by art. There were men not much older than himself who were earning good money as designers, black-and-white men, newspaper artists. He would learn the tricks of the trade and force his way into the open market. With a little luck

It was then that he looked up at Comyns and said:

"A new hobby?"

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